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THE NATIONAL TIMES, FEBRUARY 24—MARCH 1, 1975

Emergency relief system

SIR, Yvonne Preston's article in The National Times ("Unemployed thousands passed by Govt ... to private charities," February 17-22), among other things, highlights the need for the introduction of a national emergency relief system.

In December 1973 I completed a working paper on emergency relief for the Social Welfare Commission. The report was released by the Minister for Social

Security, Mr Hayden, in December 1974.

The report advocated that emergency relief should be:

- non-categorical, covering all persons without distinctions;
- available to people on the basis of need;
- available in an efficient, dignified and consistent fashion;
- available in cash but applicants would have choice of opting for in-kind assistance;
- based on public criteria.

At present, emergency relief is available on an ad hoc basis from statutory and voluntary agencies. The criteria used to assess need, the accessibility of relief and the conditions under which relief is available vary throughout Australia.

Emergency relief rates are determined by factors and circumstances unrelated to human need. For a variety of political, financial and moral reasons statutory and voluntary agencies discriminate between the "deserving" and the "undeserving" poor.

As a consequence, many people unquestionably in need of help are excluded from relief programs.

Emergency relief will always be necessary, but it should be regarded as supplementary and secondary to a basic income security program. At the present time, the rates and conditions of pensions and benefits are inadequate particularly for families with dependent children and the danger of introducing a national emergency relief scheme is that it might divert us from the need to increase the rates and liberalise the conditions.

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